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ABSTRACT

This digest is based on a full-length report (with the same title) on advisory committees to universities and colleges. Under decreased resources and increased pressures for more accountability, advisory committees are an effective way for colleges and universities to connect with their environments. An advisory committee is a group of volunteers that meets regularly on a long-term basis to provide advice and or support to an institution or one of its sub-units. They range from those that consult to university presidents on broad policy issues to committees that focus on specific tasks and decisions. Effective advisory committees meet regularly and work together to provide advice and support that contributes significantly to the program's or institution's improvements through this can take a range of forms depending on the individual circumstances of the committee and the institution. Whether advisory committees are effective is difficult to determine because of the range of definitions of effectiveness for particular groups and the scarcity of studies on the topic. The few existing studies are in the vocational education and community college sectors, and they document widespread existence of committees that exist on paper only. A committee is more likely to be effective if: (1) institutional representatives desire input, (2) committee members are knowledgeable, committed, and given some recognition; (3) committee processes are effective and meaningful; and (4) the expectations about the committee's role are clear. (Contains 12 references.) (JB)

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Creating An Effective Strategy for Programmatic Improvement

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The Advisory Committee Advantage

Creating An Effective Strategy for Programmatic Improvement

Lee Teitel

Advisory committees are effective ways to help connect universities and colleges to their environments. Interest in advisory committees has increased in recent years as institutions of higher education and their programs face intense challenges in adapting to and meeting today's needs. Driven, in many cases, by declining enrollments and/or diminishing budgets, institutions find themselves under increased pressure to do more with less. At the same time, demands and expectations for responsiveness and accountability have increased, requiring greater interaction with the world outside the ivory tower. Advisory committees represent a "bridge to the external public" (Thompson 1984, p. 27), and the growth of interest in advisory committees shares its roots with the recent surge of attention to strategic planning and total quality management. Advisory committees can provide mechanisms at all levels of higher education to help improve communication and interaction with the outside world. They can provide fresh insights, powerful connections, access to valuable resources, and excellent public relations. In conjunction with a strategic plan or total quality management, they can be key elements in renewing and revitalizing an institution.

What Are Advisory Committees? What Do They Do?

The simple definition of an advisory committee is *a group of volunteers that meets regularly on a long-term basis to provide advice and/or support to an institution or one of its subunits.* Advisory committees can range from those that consult to university presidents on the broadest of policy issues (Scott 1988) to committees that focus on the nitty-gritty--what machine shop tools a community college should buy, for example (Corley 1988). By opening a window of exchange with members of the broader society, advisory committees can help institutions with a host of important functions: strengthening programs, improving management, reviewing and evaluating mission, programs, and services, recruiting personnel, raising funds, promoting public relations, and improving relationships with other organizations (Cuninggim 1985, pp. 5-16). The first three functions, and sometimes the fourth, are truly advisory in nature, as the committee provides external input into internal processes; the last three fall more into the support category, with committee members serving the organization by helping *in* the outside world.

What Is an Effective Advisory Committee?

The level of the advisory committee's work varies tremendously along a spectrum of involvement and activity. Some committees exist in name only and have never met or, after one organizational meeting, go on for years on paper. Others meet once or twice annually, for largely ceremonial purposes. Others are largely a collection of advisers who might individually provide advice or support but whose committees rarely, if ever, meet. At the other end of the spectrum are occasionally overinvolved advisory committees. They provide advice where none is wanted, and they get involved in affairs that should be left for program directors, staff, or faculty.

Effective advisory committees avoid both extremes. They are committees that meet regularly and work together to provide advice and/or support that contributes significantly to the program's or institution's improvement. Even within this definition of effectiveness, however, can be a broad range of activity. Some advisory committees serve mostly as boosters, raising funds, providing connections to outside resources, promoting public relations, and, in general, providing important support and service while offering little or no advice. Although not technically "advisory," they are included here because they are a common type of advisory committee and because they can make significant contributions to a program. Committees that do provide advice range from those whose focus and direction are carefully directed by the staff, administration, or faculty to those with significant independence whose advice covers a wide scope and range of topics. Some committees provide service as well as advice.

How Many Advisory Committees Are Effective?

Determining how many advisory committees are effective is difficult for two reasons. First, not everyone agrees on the definition of effectiveness. Some deans or program directors, for instance, might be happy with a ceremonial committee comprised of high-profile individuals in the community who meet once a year and say nice things about the program. Other administrators, who reluctantly establish an advisory group because of an external mandate, might be pleased to have it exist

solely on paper. Some deans might be very happy to have a committee of advisers to call on for individual consultation and advice. Such committees do not meet the earlier definition of an effective advisory committee, however, because they do not work together to contribute significantly to the program's or institution's improvement.

Second, studies of advisory committees' effectiveness are very rare. Institutions might list their advisory committees in their bulletins and reports, but they are unlikely to collect information about their effectiveness and even less likely to report it in the literature. The few existing studies on effectiveness are in the vocational education and community college sectors and were conducted by outside agencies that contacted committee members directly. They document the widespread existence of paper committees whose "members" did not even know they were "serving" (Massachusetts Dept. of Education 1985, 1986). Other, anecdotal evidence also suggests that many programs and institutions do not effectively use their advisory committees for advice or support (Axelrod 1991; Laney 1984).

What Makes an Advisory Committee Effective?

An advisory group is more likely to be effective at providing advice and support when:

1. Institutional representatives (deans, directors, staff, faculty) genuinely desire the committee's input;
2. The committee is comprised of knowledgeable, committed individuals whose interest in volunteering their own time is sustained by appropriate recognition and rewards;
3. The committee's group processes and procedures for governance allow for regular meetings, a sense of engagement and ownership, and sufficient access to information about the program or institution so that the committee can offer useful advice and support;
4. The expectations about the roles of the committee in providing advice and support are clear, consistent, and well communicated.

How Can Those Working with Advisory Committees Improve Their Effectiveness?

The staff, faculty, and administrators who work with advisory committees need to think through how much support and/or advice they really want. Advisory groups, although they afford great potential, usually require additional work for management and can complicate matters. Institutional representatives need to decide what kinds of support or how much advice they want and then clearly communicate it to potential committee members. The greatest source of dissatisfaction with advisory committees comes from poor communications and a mismatch of expectations. Potential members who accept an invitation to join an advisory committee to provide advice and input are usually pleased and even proud to be recognized for their "acknowledged expertise" (Light 1982), but if they find themselves in a ceremonial role, lacking the information and the opportunity to make a contribution to the program, they can become quite disgruntled. Many such problems can be avoided if institutional representatives clearly and consistently communicate their expectations for the committee's roles in advice and service. Similarly, individuals invited to serve on an advisory committee should seek information about expectations and roles before they say "yes."

The potential benefits of advisory committees in a program's improvement are enormous, but for many advisory committees, the potential is not fully realized.

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